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ABSTRACT

Roles in the Jewish-American family system tend to be flexible, without a clearly defined division of labor or hierarchy of authority. Husband-father and wife-mother roles tend to be somewhat interchangeable and androgynous. Because role expectations constantly change to fit changing circumstances, ambiguity in each member's perception of expectations for behavior may result. The process of decision making, whether between spouses or between parents and children, responds to egalitarian, participatory ideals, within a cultural context of collectivistic, mutual responsibility for each other's behavior. Verbal argumentation within a family may symbolize emotional closeness and may be a way of negotiating family decision making. The Jewish-American family role system at its most functional resembles a communal participatory democracy of assertive equals. At its most dysfunctional, it is a chaotic anarchy with ambiguous role expectations. Therapists and researchers must be sensitive to the ethnic-cultural dimension of family relationships, including that of power relationships. Otherwise, they may apply a conventional Anglo-American cultural model of family relationships in their interpretations and, in so doing, miss seeing the hidden ethnic-cultural dimension of family life. A three-page reference list is provided. (NB)

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Ethnic Variations in Family Power Relations: Part I - Jewish American Families

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(Part II - "Italian American Families" by Dorothy Balancio, is available in a separate paper from that author.)

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Ethnic Variations in Family Power Relations: Part I - Jewish American Families

by Jeffrey S. Victor, PhD

1. Ethnic Variations in Family Power Relations
2. Husband-Wife Power Relations in the Jewish-American Family
3. Parent-Child Power Relations in the Jewish-American Family
4. Communication and Conflict Management in the Jewish-American Family
5. Conclusion: Power Relations in the Jewish-American Family Role System

-1- Ethnic Variations in Family Power Relations

This paper presents a comprehensive review of past research concerning power relations in the Jewish-American family role system. It does not present original research findings. Instead, it organizes past research findings into a framework which can be of practical use to the therapists and researchers concerned with family power relations. The basic premise of this paper is the the ethnic cultural dimension of family power relations is a crucial point-of-view in understanding the interpersonal, social psychological level of family life. This 'hidden dimension' of family relationships has generally been neglected by researchers, therapists, and textbook writers. This cultural point-of-view is particularly important for a therapist, when he or she has been brought up in a different ethnic culture than his or her clients; and also when a client family involves an ethnically mixed marriage (a cross-cultural marriage).

This paper focuses upon power as process in interpersonal relationships (Cromwell and Olson, 1975). In this paper, family power relations refers to culturally structured processes of decision making built into family role expectations. The family is viewed as being a dynamic system of role relations, in constant process of change and evolution. Family systems theory and symbolic interaction theory are particularly useful theoretical

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frameworks to use in the study of power as process in family life. These frameworks sensitize us to the basic premise that any informal rule or behavior is ultimately interpreted through the culturally shaped 'meanings' of actors in family roles. The same behavior does not necessarily have the same meaning in two different culturally shaped family systems.

The following are some of the underlying cultural factors affecting family power relations, which are dealt with in this paper. A culture's basic assumptions about 'human nature' are fundamental factors which shape family decision-making. Included here are beliefs about any possible inborn qualities of being human, with which the adult world of parents must deal, starting at the birth of a child. These beliefs are elaborated in an everyday 'implicit psychology' held by parents about children; a folk child psychology which runs much deeper than any professional child psychology. Other fundamental beliefs about 'human nature' include assumptions about masculinity and femininity, embedded in conceptions of 'natural' gender roles. Secondly, cultures convey fundamental beliefs about authority in the family, both formally recognized, 'official' authority and informally sanctioned, 'covert' authority. These two kinds of culturally attributed authority are not necessarily unified and overlapping in a family system. In relation to authority, cultures also convey beliefs about the proper jurisdiction of authority in different roles in the division of labor. Thirdly, cultures teach informal rules for interpersonal negotiation and bargaining in family relations. Finally, cultures convey basic assumptions about verbal conflict between members in various family roles. Such assumptions may differ greatly between different cultural groups. Also, in relation to family conflict, cultures teach a wide variety of informal rules for conflict management within the family system.

In brief, then, each culture provides a 'blueprint' for channeling power relations in the family role system. The role players in any specific family generally play their roles according to this 'blueprint'. The specific outcomes of the decision making process vary from specific family to specific family,

depending upon structural factors such as resources for personal power and personality attributes such as verbal skill.

2. Husband-Wife Power Relations in the Jewish -American Family

There exists no carefully controlled research into contemporary expectations of Jewish-American married couples. However; there does exist indirect evidence, which suggests that modernist gender roles and equality in marital decision-making is common in Jewish marriages; except perhaps among highly observant, traditionalist Jews (Farber, et.al., 1981). It has often claimed that the Orthodox Jewish religious tradition is highly patriarchal in formal family authority. However; such claims miss the underlying social reality that in the Eastern European Jewish cultural tradition, wives had considerable power in family decision-making, by virtue of the fact that wives had access to a crucial resource for family power. They were commonly partners in the management of the family business or trade (Farber, et.al., 1981; Reguer, 1979). Oftentimes, wives would manage the family enterprise, including finances, so that a husband could spend more time in religious study with other men. Therefore, Easter European Jewish women did not bring to America a heritage of subordination and submissiveness toward a husband's authority. Any expression of a wife's deference to her husband was likely to be a 'pro forma' recognition of her husband's pretentions of formal authority, designed not to hurt his sense of dignity. It is quite likely that Eastern European Jewish women had a heritage of patient assertiveness in expressing their opinions and desires in family decision-making with their menfolk. This would be consistent with the observations of clinical psychologists, who report a high degree of family democracy in Jewish-American homes today (Zuk, 1978; Herz and Rosen, 1982).

There is solid research evidence that Jewish women are more inclined to hold egalitarian gender role attitudes, than are women in most other American ethnic groups. For example, one study using data from five large-scale attitude surveys done between

1964 and 1974, found Jewish women to be more egalitarian than women in any other cultural group (Mason, Czajka and Arber, 1976). Another study of gender role attitudes, using data from five attitude surveys done in Detroit from 1962 to 1977, also found Jewish women to be more egalitarian than women in any other social group studied, including college educated women (Thornton and Freedman, 1979). A recent research project, which investigated the feminist sympathies of 400 college women, found Jewish women to be significantly more likely to hold feminist attitudes than either Catholic or Protestant women (Korman, 1983). Finally, an interview study of upper-middle class Jewish wives found equality in marital decision-making to be the norm for Jewish couples (Schwartz and Wyden, 1969).

Perhaps is should come as no surprise that a great many leaders of the Women's Movement are Jewish women, such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan. None of this evidence, however, should be taken to mean that Jewish women are uniformly ardent feminists. Not at all. The vast majority of Jewish women are probably moderate feminists, who share a concern for the practical issues of women's equality.

One research project which used in-depth interviews and questionnaires with a sample of 75 Jewish, 75 Italian, and 75 Slavic women of three generations, found the Jewish women of all generations to hold the most feminist attitudes (Krause, 1978). Even the Jewish grandmothers were significantly more feminist than the Italian or Slavic grandmothers. The feminist response to questions in this study were ones which affirmed egalitarian gender role expectations in the family.

Other research provides evidence that Jewish-American women are more likely than women in many other ethnic cultural groups to act according to 'modernist', egalitarian gender roles, as indicated by pursuit of a college education and employment after marriage. Research on college attendance, for example, indicates that Jewish women born since World War II are more likely to attend college than are non-Jewish women. Jewish National Population Study found that "Among (Jewish) women aged 30-39, only

2.4 percent had less than a high school degree, and as many as 75 percent had some college education" (Goldstein, 1981). College education for women is closely linked to employment after marriage. A study of the Jewish population of the greater New York City area found that more than half of Jewish women over the age of 16 were either pursuing education or were employed (Massarik, 1976). It is likely that well over half of married Jewish women are employed, either in full-time or part-time jobs.

What about the gender role attitudes of Jewish-American men? There exists some research on this question. Historical studies point to the conclusion that Jewish-American men share similar gender role attitudes with those of Jewish-American women. The Eastern European Jewish heritage led men to expect their women to be assertive in expressing their views and preferences, rather than submissive and deferential to male authority (Reguer, 1979; Faber, et.al., 1981). The traditional Anglo-American stereotype of the 'macho'man, who is gentle but firmly dominant in his relations with women, and who is emotionally reserved and physically aggressive when offended is foreign to the heritage of Jewish men Reguer, 1979). Instead, the traditional Eastern European Jewish concept of masculinity emphasized intellectual prowess and business acumen.

Today, Jewish husbands are probably more likely to appreciate an assertive wife, without feeling a need to dominate and control her, than are men from many other ethnic groups. Some evidence for this assumption exists in an intensive interview study of 62 college men at Columbia University in New York City, which found that Jewish and Protestant men were much less likely than the Catholic men to be troubled by their lack of dominance in relation to women (Komarovsky, 1976). Another research project, which used N.O.R.C. national survey data for the years 1972 to 1980, found that Jewish men were significantly more likely to hold egalitarian gender role attitudes, than were Fundamentalist Protestant, non-Fundamentalist Protestant, and Catholic men (Chi and Houseknect, 1985). In other words, when comparing men with different religious preferences, Jewish-American men are distinctive

in holding egalitarian attitudes towards women.

One research study provides evidence that Jewish-American men express their masculinity in a distinctively different way than do Anglo-American men. The research administered the M.M.P.I. to 169 male students at Yeshiva University in New York City, a college which attracts primarily traditionalist (mainly Orthodox) Jewish students (Levinson, 1962). It found that the M.M.P.I. could not be usefully applied to men from Jewish culture, because Jewish men affirm many self-descriptions which are normatively "feminine" in Anglo-American culture. For example, the Jewish men affirmed an interest in books, poetry, dramatics, cooking, and even movie love stories. They saw themselves as not being entirely self-confident and as having feelings which are easily hurt. They disavowed any interest in hunting, auto-racing, horseback riding, being a soldier or being a sports reporter. Note that all these responses are commonly regarded as being so-called "feminine" in Anglo-American culture. It is useful to keep in mind that this research was conducted before the more recent theoretical development of the concept of androgyny. In contemporary psychological terms, these Jewish men are androgynous (as are Jewish women).

So far, the research literature appears to indicate that the ethnic-cultural norms of Jewish-Americans prescribe androgynous gender roles and equal power in marital decision-making, perhaps more so than do the norms of other religio-ethnic groups in American society. While it is true that many of the aforementioned studies do not carefully control for differences in social class and educational level, they do suggest that ethnic-cultural differences may exist between Jews and non-Jews beyond the influence of formal education on gender role attitudes. Such an implication can be drawn, for example, from a study of marital power relations in a sample of 166 Israeli-Jewish married couples (Katz, 1983). The research found that 71% of all marital decisions were reported to be made jointly by the Israeli-Jewish couples, compared with only 40% to 50% of marital decisions, as reported in research with egalitarian American couples. The

researcher noted that Israeli-Jewish marital decision-making tends to be "syncratic" (with most problems perceived to be mutual and solved jointly), compared to the more "autonomous" decision-making in Anglo-American marriages (where each partner is free to make decisions about his or her own "personal" concerns). These research findings about Israeli-Jewish marriages are consistent with clinical observations and informed speculation about the ethnic cultural context of Jewish-American families, which are described as exhibiting high "interconnectedness" between members (Sklare, 1971; Zuk, 1978; Herz and Rosen, 1982). In other words, cultural differences in meanings may exist on the interpersonal (social psychological) level, which are not readily apparent from gross data comparing specific variables such as "egalitarian attitudes".

In Jewish-American marriages, power struggles aimed at dominance and control of the relationship are likely to be particularly disruptive to the relationship, because of the "normal" Jewish cultural expectation for equality in marital decision-making. Having been socialized from childhood to expect an active, democrat · style of family decision-making (Cherlin and Celebuski, 1983), Jews are likely to be highly sensitive to attempts to domineer and subordinate. A common reaction of the spouse who feels dominated is to withdraw from interaction. It is not at all unusual for wives of controlling and dominating husbands to experience repressed anger. This pattern is well recognized. Similarly, Jewish husbands can be expected to show this pattern of withdrawal and repressed anger in response to controlling and domineering wives. Given the similarity of Jewish-American gender roles, this should be no surprise to the therapist who is sensitive to ethnic-cultural diversity.

3. Parent-Child Power Relations in the Jewish-American Family

Research and clinical observations confirm the highly democratic nature of parent-child relations in the Jewish-American

family (Zuk, 1978; Herz and Rosen, 1982). For example, one study using national survey data found that Jewish parents are more supportive and less authoritarian, than are parents in seven other Catholic and Protestant ethnic groups (Greeley, 1977). In practice, "democratic" child-rearing among Jewish parents means that they actively solicit their children's preferences and opinions. Children participate in the negotiation of family decision-making.

This democratic family style reflects fundamental, traditional Jewish assumptions about human nature and child psychology. Every child is viewed as having his or her own inborn temperment, preferences and abilities. Consequently, parents can only hope to channel (or guide) the behavior of a child toward adult expectations (Farber, et.al., 1981). A child's unfolding character is seen as a product of his or her inborn temperment, in addition to what is learned from parents. A responsible parent, therefore, is one who works tirelessly at the task of parenthood, which is to direct the child's energies and talents toward constructive human values.

Jewish-American parents have little confidence in the effectiveness of punishment to obtain desired behavior. When Jewish parents do punish or criticize their children, they do so reluctantly and with the aim of diverting a child's inner motives toward more constructive channels. Instead, Jewish parental influence techniques emphasize explanation, rational persuasion, cautioning children against misbehavior, and distracting them away from undesirable interests (Blau, 1974; Herz and Rosen, 1981). Less commonly, Jewish-American parents will try cajoling, pleading, complaining, and appeals to guilt. The evidence from research indicates that Jewish parents are more likely to praise their children for accomplishments and less likely to scold their children for mistakes than are parents in any other American ethnic group (Sanua, 1974; Greeley, 1977). Jewish-American parents are particularly worried about causing a child to experience fear of adults, especially themselves as parents (Blau, 1974). Therefore; it is not surprising that Jewish parents rarely employ

physical punishment (Farber, et.al., 1981).

If an authoritarian household is one where children's obedience is a primary value (usually enforced by punishment), a democratic household is one where children's autonomy (or self-direction) is a primary value. Jewish parents tend to value autonomy more than they value obedience. One research project which used national survey data, for example, found that Jewish parents of all social class levels valued a child's autonomy more, and valued obedience less, than did Catholic or Protestant parents (Cherlin and Celebuski, 1983). It should not be surprising then to learn that Jewish parents tolerate more "disobedience" from children, than do non-Jewish parents. Research and clinical observations report that Jewish parents tend to be unusually tolerant toward misbehavior, such as verbal aggression ("talking back"), whining, crying, sillyness, and forgetting of household chores (Strodtbeck, 1958; Blau, 1974; Zuk, 1978). This parental behavior may be misinterpreted by neighboring non-Jewish parents as excessive "permissiveness" and a way of "spoiling" children.

The emphasis of Jewish-American parents upon autonomy encourages children to develop independent thinking and to assert their own preferences and opinions. However; "independence" does not have the same meaning in Jewish family culture, as in mainstream Anglo-American culture. Jewish parents do not encourage their children to become emotionally independent from their families. Nor do they encourage a child to seek isolating self-reliance outside of the family circle (Blau, 1974; Sanua, 1974). The tradition of shared responsibility continues to mean that the child's day-to-day problems and concerns are partly the responsibility of his or her parents. Jewish parents feel free to "intrude" into the lives of their children of any age (Herz and Rosen, 1982). This pattern is sometimes seen by non-Jewish parents as creating "dependent" behavior in children. Jewish parents would disagree. Instead, Jewish parents tend to feel that children who become "too independent" from their parents will become too dependent upon their peer group and too easily influenced by peers toward undesirable behavior outside of the family (Blau,1974;

Sanua, 1974). It is common for Jewish parents to carefully supervise and regulate their children's association with other children and to sharply disapprove of "undesirable" friendship associations.

In the traditional Jewish family, the mother was attributed primary responsibility for child-care and greater authority in decision-making in day-to-day issues concerning child-rearing (Blau, 1974; Herz and Rosen, 1982). While this was also so in most other traditional families in American society, regardless of cultural background, this role expectation had a particular meaning in Jewish family culture. What this meant was that a Jewish husband was conventionally expected to defer to his wife's preferences and opinions concerning "what was best for the children" (Zuk, 1978; Herz and Rosen, 1982). She often called upon her husband for assistance in managing difficulties, but he was supposed to respect her wisdom and intuition with the children. According to traditional Jewish parental role expectations, therefore, mothers had greater authority than fathers in decision-making about child-rearing. However, among non-traditional Jews, this imbalance of authority in child-rearing may be disappearing today, resulting in a more equal involvement of both parents in child-rearing decisions; but also more quarreling about child-care issues (Farber, et.al., 1981; Herz and Rosen, 1982). A great many Jewish mothers today work in time-consuming careers. Shared responsibility for child-care has now become a necessity, not simply an ideal. Given the Jewish heritage which emphasizes shared responsibility, it is likely that Jewish husbands will become more actively involved in day-to-day parenting activities and decisions.

One major cultural distinction in Jewish parental roles is the role-ideal of father as primary moral and intellectual educator for sons (Waxman, 1984). In the traditional family, the father was responsible for the religious education of sons. This interaction created close bonds between fathers and sons. In adapting to American society, most Jewish families have moved away from this traditional ideal of father as teacher. It has

been replaced with father as "breadwinner". However, this more narrow conception of a Jewish father may again be changing with the greater involvement of Jewish fathers in child-rearing (Fuchs, 1980).

An understanding of Jewish parent-child relations must deal with the "Jewish mother" stereotype (Bienstock, 1979; Rothbell, 1981). As is the case with all narrow stereotypes, this portrait offers grains of truth planted in a wasteland of falsehood. This stereotype is one of an over-protective, quilt-mongering, self-proclaimed martyr, who constantly over-feeds her children. The portrait is obviously a deragatory one, whether found in the humor of Jewish comedians or non-Jewish jokesters. The stereotype has become prominent only in recent decades, perhaps because social value of motherhood has declined. It may be seen to be an insult to highly attentive mothers of any ethnic group, whether Italian, Chicano, Black or whatever. Some research presents evidence that Jewish mothers are not any more "over-protective" or controlling than are mothers from other ethnic groups (Radetsky, Handelsman, and Brown, 1984).

-4-

Communication and Conflict Management in the Jewish-American Family

The ability to articulate one's thoughts and feelings is very highly valued in Jewish culture. Therefore, it is no surprise that an open expression of thoughts and feelings is found in clinical case studies to be a common characteristic of Jewish-American family life (Herz and Rosen, 1982). Jewish husbands and wives highly value intimate communication as being a "normal" way to calm tensions and to solve life's problems together (Herz and Rosen, 1982). Even children are commonly included in the discussion of family concerns and their contributions are encouraged. Family members actively try to express their personal feelings and thoughts in great detail and actively seek to understand each other. When discussing an important issue, Jews tend to seek complex levels of meaning and interpretation and are not

easily satisfied by short, simple explanations (Herz and Rosen, 1982).

One non-Jewish anthropologist from the Mid-West happened to do field research in New York City, on Jewish family "clubs" (Mitchell, 1978). He quickly learned that in order to gain acceptance into private family circles for his research, he had to adapt himself to the communication style preferred by Jewish-Americans. He found that his subjects did not trust him when he assumed a quiet, reserved self-presentation. They saw this disposition as being aloof and condescending rather than polite and self-effacing. Instead, he found that Jews prefer an animated style of communication, with frequent facial expression and hand gesturing. They disclose personal information and feelings in conversation rather quickly and easily. Similarly, they actively assert their own personal viewpoint and expect others to do so with them. Jewish-Americans expect and enjoy direct engagement in conversation, accompanied by lively emotional expression. Emotionally intense discussions can take place without any necessity of determining "who is right and who is wrong", or what has been accomplished by talking. Anglo-Americans who have learned to prefer greater caution, reserve and indirection in communication, may find this style of communication in families to be a bit intrusive and offensive (McGill and Pearce, 1982).

Clinical studies of Jewish families have found that Jews easily and openly express negative feelings (Herz and Rosen, 1982). Jews do not expect each other to stoically "grin and bear" frustration and pain, as is common in Anglo-American culture (McGill and Pearce, 1982). Jewish men, as well as women, easily voice complaints about aches and pains, irritations, bad moods and misfortunes.

A common Jewish predisposition, given this people's persistently tragic history, is to see life as a shared suffering. Complaining is often employed as a symbolic means of reaching out and making emotional contact with others. Similarly, clinicians report that Jewish marriage partners will sometimes complain to each other and nag each other about minor concerns, as a way of

showing personal care for each other (Herz and Rosen, 1982).

Verbal conflict can be a means of making often playful social contact and testing the care and trustfulness in a relationship. As such, sociable argumentation can be distinguished from competitive verbal conflict, in which speakers are concerned with winning and losing. Sociable argumentation has been found in socio-linguistic research to be a characteristic style of Jewish discourse. One researcher spent several years interviewing a sample of lower-middle class Jews of Eastern European descent in Philadelphia, studying their ethnic-cultural patterns of communication (Schiffrin, 1984). The researcher found that Jewish married couples commonly engaged in sociable argumentation during the interviews, which the researcher interpreted as a symbolic display of marital solidarity, rather than as a symptom of any serious conflict. Sociable argumentation between marriage partners conveys the implicit message in Jewish culture that, if a couple is secure enough in their relationship and genuinely cares enough about each other, they can easily voice public disagreement. In contrast, complete harmony of views between marriage partners in an interview would be perceived as suspect in Jewish culture, as being either a lack of genuine emotional contact, or being a public facade hiding serious underlying marital conflict. Sociable argementation as a conventional style of discourse and as a mode of establishing emotional contact has deep and ancient roots in Jewish culture and religious education. This research provides some evidence that Jewish marriage partners have a high tolerance for verbal conflict in their relationship. The research also indicates that different ethnic groups may culturally attribute different meanings to verbal conflict between marriage partners.

Other ethnic groups may also value sociable argumentation between intimates. My own research suggests that it is common in French culture (Victor, 1980). It may also be characteristic of Italian culture . However, I suggest that it is not valued between marriage partners from Northern European cultrues, including Anglo-American culture.

In Jewish families, anger can be openly expressed verbally,

but any kind of physical aggression evokes intense disapproval and is extremely rare (Herz and Rosen, 1982; Zuk, 1978). Anger may be expressed with great verbal skill in complaints, criticism, and insults. This seems to be tolerated, even from children. An outside observer may easily overestimate the level of antagonism in a Jewish family because angry verbal expressions are taken less seriously by Jews than by many non-Jews, as long as there is no physical aggression.

One problem in Jewish-American family communication is that words can become a substitute for action in problem-solving. Family and personal problems may be complained about, argued about, discussed interminably and analyzed from many different angles of vision, without anything ever being acted upon toward a solution (Herz and Rosen, 1982). Jewish-Americans often regard understanding a problem, as if understanding itself actually did something to solve a problem. Some family therapists observe that Jewish clients may actually enjoy the discussion and analysis of therapy, but have to really be "pushed" to take action to change their behavior (Herz and Rosen, 1982).

5. Conclusion:
Power Relations in the Jewish-American Family Role System

Roles in the Jewish-American family system tend to be quite flexible, without a very sharply delineated division of labor or hierarchy of authority. Husband-father and wife-mother roles tend to be rather interchangeable and androgynous, with role expectations constantly being re-negotiated to fit changing circumstances. The result often is ambiguity in each member's perception of expectations for behavior. The process of decision-making, whether between husbands and wives or between parents and children responds to egalitarian, participatory ideals, within a cultural context of collectivistic, mutual responsibility for each other's behavior (rather than "personal" autonomy and responsibility). Verbal argumentation between members is easily,

openly and frequently expressed, as a symbol of emotional closeness and as a way of constantly negotiating family decision-making. Family members can be highly interconnected emotionally, due to warm, accepting intimate communication; yet decision-making can at times become a bit chaotic.

When the Jewish-American family role system is at its best, or most functional, it resembles a communal participatory democracy of assertive equals. When it is at its worst, or most dysfunctional, it is a chaotic anarchy with ambiguous role expectations and regular open verbal conflict. Specific Jewish-American families may be at one pole or the other, or somewhere in between depending on the particular day.

The practical implication of this survey of available research on power relations in the Jewish-American family system is obvious. Therapists and researchers need to be sensitively aware of, and take into consideration, the ethnic-cultural dimension of family relationships, including that of power relationships. If they do not, they are apt to apply a conventional Anglo-American cultural model of family relationships *in* their interpretations. In doing so, they will miss seeing the "hidden dimension" of family life.

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